

FAIRLIGHT PRESERVATION TRUST

Coastal Erosion - How close did it get?

In the September 2020 edition of the Fairlight News Dr Ruth Kosmin gave the history of the events which led to the construction of the first berm along Sea Road in the summer of 1990. In the last edition of the Fairlight News Ruth wrote that "Our Village has protection that is the envy of people in other threatened areas of the country". This is no doubt absolutely true. However, this was not achieved without a lot of tenacity, hard work **and a major gamble.**

I would like to explain to readers the events which gave rise to the construction of the Second stage berm along Rockmead Road in 2007. Extra protection was considered essential because of the rapidly developing landslip in that area of the Cove and the risk of losing many, many houses in the very near future.

In July 2005, the Rother District Council Cabinet came to Fairlight to discuss and give an ultimatum to the residents demanding that we raise £89,000 and deposit it with the Council within 20 days. The money was for a further engineering study to be done of the state of the Fairlight cliffs or the protection, which we were seeking, would not be provided. However, the Council insisted that if they did not get the necessary funding for the protection scheme from the Environment Agency Fairlight residents would not be refunded the £89,000 cost of the study and we would not get the protection that we were seeking. By any standards, these were extremely harsh terms.

So within the tight timetable of 20 days we had to write the letter below which sets out very clearly the gamble that the Trust was then asking residents to take. The letter had to be hand-delivered to each home (as the email system was not in operation then). We had to raise the funds, bank the money and deliver a cheque to Rother within the strict time limit imposed under the conditions set out within the legal document provided by them. For the historical record, the letter to residents dated 16 July 2005 is set out below. It explains the dilemma in which we were placed.

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" This Appeal is being delivered to every House that Engineers say is at Risk.

FAIRLIGHT COVE PRESERVATION TRUST.

We feel it is necessary following last Friday's Rother District Council's Cabinet Meeting to set out as clearly as possible the decisions made at that Meeting by the Cabinet.

The Cabinet agreed to Commission a Detailed Design Study that could cost £89,000 on the following terms:

- 1) That the Fairlight Cove Preservation Trust lodges with Rother District Council the sum of £89,000.
- 2) This sum of money will be invested in a separate bank account held by the Council.
- 3) If the Grant Application to Defra, following upon the Design Study, fails on the following points the money in this account will be paid to Rother: -
 - If Defra rejects the Application for a Grant.
 - If the offered Grant is less than 80% of the cost of the Scheme.

If, however, the engineering scheme IS enabled, by a grant of 80% or more, to go ahead, then this money will be paid back to the Trust.

And, if both of Rother's criteria are met, but Rother still decides not to go ahead with the scheme, then the money will be repaid to the Trust.

It goes without saying that these are not terms we should like, but it does mean that for the present time the Scheme (for engineering work to prevent further landslide) is progressing and we should, hopefully, eventually receive grant aid from Defra.

Our present financial position is that we have just under £10,000 in the bank. We also have one couple who have pledged up to £36,000, and another couple £10,000. This gives us a total of £56,000. **We still need to raise another £33,000 most urgently.**

While we are not happy with the situation that the Trust has been placed in we feel that we need to give Trust Members the opportunity to contribute towards this £33,000 short-fall.

We need to stress to members that they must only make this commitment if they are happy to do so and are also in the financial position. At the same time you do not need us to remind you of the value of your home and of the expected erosion by landslip in forthcoming years.

Time is unfortunately not on our side. We need to have this money lodged with the Council as soon as possible. We appreciate that your money could be in a bank account that needs a notice period before withdrawal. We will therefore at this time be prepared to accept "in good faith" a pledge from any members who feel able to help in this matter. We shall keep a register of all monies received so that it can be returned, but we must emphasise that there is a risk that a suitable grant may not be available for our scheme and this money will then be paid to Rother District Council.

Should this happen we shall as a Trust continue with fund raising to repay any money donated. But we cannot say how quickly the Trust will be able to repay it. We believe that in the situation where our money is forfeited, if money has been donated from a property that is **subsequently lost**, the donors from that property must be the first people to have their donation repaid by the Trust.

Since the Trust has re-formed it has raised just under £13,000, and this has been at a time when there has been no urgent need for funds for a specific task. We now have that specific task and to increase our rate of fund raising we must now seek sponsorships etc from businesses.

We have attached to this letter a form for members to use if they feel that they are happy to pledge a sum of money to this fund. Please only use this form if you are happy to do so and are prepared to meet the commitment. We also need to have these forms returned by

12 noon on Thursday 28th July 2005.

We have been led to believe that grant aid, in one form or another, will cover almost the entire cost of the Scheme, but this is not the information that Rother is receiving. Nobody will know until Rother applies for grant aid exactly how much that aid will be. We are however hoping for meetings, before the Trust commits itself to this agreement, with John Horne, DEFRA's Regional Engineer, and with Michael Foster MP to try to establish the likely level of grant that will be available to RDC

So why then take this gamble? We know that the "Priority Score" for 2007/8 is 15 and that the proposed Design Study should give 'our' Scheme 15+ points, thus enabling work here to go ahead in 2007/8. We also know that the required score could rise in September along with the score for 2008/9. It is therefore essential to improve our Scheme's score if we are to get engineering work carried out at all.

We are also aware that discussions are taking place that may allow DEFRA to fund Local Authority schemes to 100% in line with Environment Agency schemes.

If the scheme is put in place the engineers are sure it will reduce landslip to the previous 'normal' level of erosion in the area and it will save many of the properties now at risk. It will also remove the blight from the village that is affecting everybody.

We currently have 215 members covering 166 properties. We therefore have a target figure of £250 per property. We are aware however that some members will not be able to contribute, due to restricted means. Others may be on holiday, and others do not reside in this country, so **the amount that you are able to donate is a personal matter and will be kept strictly confidential.** However where people able to double or even treble this figure it will help to reach the overall TARGET.

While we do not have the time to call a formal meeting for a formal decision we do believe that members would wish to have an opportunity to discuss the present situation with the committee in detail, and therefore there will be an **informal General Meeting on Sunday 31st July at 2-30pm in the Village Hall.**

The ball at the present time is very much in our court If we are not able to raise this money the scheme will be dead. ”

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Needless to say, amazingly we did achieve the total needed to get the extra study done and we were further lucky that the Environment Agency agreed to fund the project 100%. Rother could therefore not refuse to apply for the grant aid. Plus, with the help of the then local MP Michael Foster, Natural England withdrew their objections to the scheme going ahead. Had we not met the ultimatum set by the Rother Cabinet the landslip situation in Rockmead Road would have continued, making Fairlight look a totally different place than it looks today, and the third berm would not now be in place either.

So why the ultimatum from Rother? You will know from Ruth's previous history of the Sea Road Berm that Rother tried as hard as they could to prevent that being built, and sadly while some of the Officers and Councillors had changed, the attitude of Rother had not. They were possibly further upset by those residents who attended en masse two of their Cabinet meetings when the Fairlight issue was being discussed. So, by placing this ultimatum on the Trust they created a situation in which, had the Trust failed to raise the necessary funds within the time limit, Rother would then have been able to wriggle out of their responsibilities as Coast Protection Authority. They thus put the burden on the Trust and the local residents for the project not going ahead. In effect, they could have claimed "We gave you a chance but you failed".

To finish on a human note, thanks to the residents of Fairlight, only five houses on Rockmead Road were lost to the landslip and the homes of very many local residents were saved. There were a number of heroes of this period including Dr John Sinclair, and two other members of the Trust who donated/gambled £5,000 each to meet the target figure needed. The positive outcome meant that the whole Rockmead area of the village was saved and John's wife, Kathy Sinclair, was able to finish her days happily living in her home, "Fairhurst", writing her books.

However, the problems of coastal erosion and landslip in the Cove area continue as has been explained in previous articles in the Fairlight News. It is for this reason that it is so important that the Fairlight Preservation Trust remains active in monitoring the situation and is able to react quickly whenever a problem arises. So if you are NOT A MEMBER WE WOULD WELCOME YOUR SUPPORT. We are not asking for hundreds of pounds, as in the attached letter. The cost is just over a penny a day - only £10.00 for a three-year membership.

Please contact our Membership Secretary Jill Lewing at 6 Rockmead Road or email jill.lewing@btinternet.com and **help to preserve Fairlight**. Many thanks.

Paul Capps, former Secretary, Chairman and Treasurer, Fairlight Preservation Trust.